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A

FAREWELL SERMON,

PREACHED IN

CHRIST CHURCH, WESTMINSTER,

BY

THE REV. J. W. FESTING, M.A.

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“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.”—EPH. vi. 10.

I SUPPOSE that no one, who is about to give up old work, or to leave old friends, can help feeling some sort of satisfaction when he is told that he will be missed when gone. No one can do otherwise than hope that he may be remembered and thought of by those from whom he parts. It need not be entirely from selfish vanity that his feelings are such (though of course there is the danger of being selfish and vain, at least in part); there is a deeper reason, and a better one. The cause for which he has been labouring, the work which he has been permitted to do, or at least try to do, is identified with himself, and for that work's sake he will be missed. The bond between such an one and those he leaves is this work, and no one who has worked, and has cared for his work for its own sake, will not wish that that work may continue and may prosper whatever may happen to himself. His deepest wish must be this. It cannot be any thought about himself and his own interest and feelings just for the time, it must be about the deepest, the lasting interests of those for whom he still cares, though he is about to leave them. It was so in the cases of leavetaking of which we read in the Bible. There we have our pattern in this as in all things. We must hold this pattern before our eyes and try to imitate it, however hard it may be to do so. You remember our Saviour's discourses with His disciples just before His death. There is no indulgence in sentiment, no

looking back on the past for the mere pleasure of looking back; it is the future that is the main object of all the Saviour says, the dangers, the hopes, the work, the possibilities of the future; the continuance of what has been already begun. The apostles' sorrow at losing him, their remembrances of the past, are all made to merge into the consideration of their future service of God. So it is with St. Paul. Take any of the cases in which he bids farewell to his converts, how does his great love for them find utterance. In the expression of anxiety for their future, anxiety that they may so live as to do God's work and to obtain God's promises. And so it must be, at however great a distance and with however much imperfection, with any parish priest bidding farewell to those for whom he has worked and prayed. As he thinks of these friends that he is leaving, his deepest wish must be that the best things that can be gained in life may be theirs. His chief thoughts cannot be of the past; they cannot be of the present; though now that the hour of separation has come it shows him by the pain that it brings that his life is bound up with his work even more than he suspected; he cannot speak only of the present and indulge in giving vent to his feelings, he must look forward to the future, he must look beyond the changes of things temporal to those things which are eternal and which change not. His own earthly interests, his own joys and sorrows and pains, are but little matters of a few hours; they fade away into nothing when put side by side with the thought of the life, the character,—*i. e.*, the prospects for the endless years of eternity of those to whom he speaks. He wishes for them the best things, and what are the best things for them? Not love for and sympathy with himself, not that they should carry a remembrance of him to the grave. What will that of itself avail them, how will they be the

better for that alone? But true love of that God in whose presence they may abide for ever, constant remembrance of what He has done for them, of what He has commanded.

The soul of one bidding farewell to his people must long that what he may say may be indeed a bidding them fare well, that his feeling for them and theirs for him may only so far find a place as to make what he may say the more powerful, by God's grace, to bind them the more closely to Him who can give them richly all things to enjoy, gifts which they cannot receive except in a true and faithful service of Him alone.

Looking back then for this purpose (for here is one use of a remembrance of the past, that from the experience of the past we learn what to speak of as we look forward to the future), looking back on the past, I have had to ask myself upon what subject I shall speak to you this evening. In answering this question I have first of all to think, of what kind of persons are those to whom I am speaking? I am speaking to those who are Christians, and not only Christians in name, but Christians at least, to some extent, in reality. I need not plead with *you* on the first principles of religion. I need not tell you, as if it were a new truth to you, of Christ's sacrifice of Himself for sinners, of the love and the service which you owe to Him, of the hopes He holds out before you. I need not argue with you on the exceeding value of the soul; your heart has answered to the appeal,—“What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” You have trembled at the thought of that loss, you have earnestly prayed that you may be “delivered from the bitter pains of eternal death;” you have thanked God for the hope of heaven and asked Him to make you worthy of being a partaker of its joys; you know what are the blessings and what are the responsibilities of your

position as those who have been baptized; you come to church to worship God, you pray to Him regularly every day at home; you study your Bible that you may learn how to live and please Him.

What then do I wish for you? What danger do I see threatening you?

I look back on my ministry here. I think of myself and my work. I remember the hopes and the confidence with which I began. I recall the prospects of the future which my imagination then pictured. I think of what has been realized. Failure! failure!—such is the judgment written on much, I do not say on all, but on much. Part no doubt was due to the inexperience of youth which formed the plans, but part and the greater part was due to something else—to that want of which I shall presently speak. I think of the flock, of this congregation often shifting and changing in the last twelve years and a half. I think of the many with whom I have had to do in closer intercourse than that of preaching to them from this pulpit. I think of many who promised well, of whom I and others hoped much, who hoped much, I believe, of themselves. Some have fallen away altogether, fallen sadly, most sadly; others have fallen short and are not so zealous as they once were, as their irregular attendance at Church and at Holy Communion testifies; others again have varied and changed, now worse, now better, or have come up to a certain point and then wavered, have been afraid of advancing, have been content with being half-religious, (as if there could be such a thing), in the hope that some day they might be able with less effort and at a less sacrifice than it seems now to demand, to be all that they see a Christian ought to be.

And so, looking back on my own work, and thinking of the reason of some of its failures, and thinking of the lives

and characters of others as far as it has been permitted to me to know them, I see this one great and common failing—weakness, weakness in purpose, and weakness in execution of what has been purposed; I see the need for all Christians of that injunction of St. Paul's which I have taken as my text, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." Strength, that is what we all need, strength of purpose, strength in action; not the exercise only of our natural strength, but strength in the consciousness of union with the Lord Jesus Christ, strength in purposing and doing what He would have purposed and done, strength in the power of that might which is nothing less than His and which He gives to those, who are united to Him and who seek to use it.

For if a Christian were strong in the Lord what would follow? He would always do what was right, always keep in God's ways; he would increase in the knowledge of Christ; he would become holier and better continually; grace and peace would be multiplied to him; all good plans would be carried out; there would be no standing still, no falling short, no growing careless about God's worship, or private prayers, or any good habit; no falling before the devil's assaults. Such an one would certainly be ready for the coming of the Lord whenever that coming might be, and would then certainly enter into the joy of His Lord. For if a man be once started on the Christian course, and if he be strong in Christ, he will continue in that course, he will continue in safety and so end rightly.

My brethren, you have started in that Christian course. You are Christians. God has made you His children, He has given you His Holy Spirit, for you were made by Him in baptism members of Christ. You are in Christ. It is for you to continue in Him. He has put you in the way of

Isaiah and Habakkuk even when the whole Earth about them was full of wickedness, unbelief, and sin, to lift up a mighty voice of absolute certainty saying, "*the Earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*":* which made Paul and Silas sing hymns of joy at midnight in the prison at Philippi; which enabled St. Paul, while daily expecting, locked in the depths of a Roman prison, the order for his cruel and unjust execution, to write that wonderful Epistle of heroic Christian joy and triumph, the second to Timothy; the faith to which Christ our Lord Himself appealed, as He stood, surrounded by weeping mourners, before the cave in which His friend Lazarus lay buried, in the words of power "Said I not unto thee, *that if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?*"†

Yes, "*this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith,—the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*"‡

And you see it sometimes now.

The minds of many, who hear me will, I doubt not, have been turning, as I have been speaking, to some instances which have been seen here amongst us of late, of such Faith, and Hope, and Peace in God.

One death has taken place within the last ten days, which may seem to our short sight untimely, and present difficulties to faith in the wisdom and goodness that governs all. Men are ever ready to speak of such events as "mysteries"; and, no doubt, like thousands of other things, they are, more or less, mysterious. But, it is hardly possible to listen to the tone in which this is often said, without gathering a painful impression that those

* Isaiah xi. 9. ; Hab. ii 14. † St. John xi. 40. ‡ I John v. 4 ; Heb. xi. 1.

who say it do not use that expression quite sincerely,—that in their heart of hearts, they allow themselves in the feeling that such cases are not “mysteries” at all; but are manifest acts of injustice in the Divine Providence that governs the world.

But there are, thanks be to God, others amongst us, and not, I trust, a few only, whose faith is of a robuster and deeper nature; who do, with all their hearts, *believe*, even when they cannot, in the least, *see*.

It is of two remarkable and blessed cases of such true faith in God which have been seen amongst us here that I think it my duty and privilege now to speak.

It is not often, my brethren, that I think it well to speak from this sacred place of particular persons. This should, in my judgement, be done only when it happens, either that the cases are generally known to us all and that the thought of them is occupying the minds of most of us; or are of so special a nature that we may believe that God is teaching us lessons through them, in a way that He does not by ordinary events.

But the cases I am now about to speak of, have these characteristics, and they illustrate in a remarkable manner, the lessons I have been drawing from my text.

One of the two is, I doubt not, in the minds of us all this day. The other is that of a great sufferer whom we have, for some months past, been praying for, by name; and who has now at last been released from his terrible pains, and called to his rest. Both were cases of men who had in the deepest and truest sense of the words “acquainted themselves with God,” and gained thereby a peace which nothing could shake.

I will say a few words upon each of these.

The first I have mentioned was as well known to us all as any one, unless it is we ourselves, your ministers. His well known figure was as regularly seen, attending this House of God, and coming also to the Lord's Table, during the years he lived here, as that of any one. Never, scarcely, while at home was he absent, though he lived at some distance, and though the great and ceaseless activity of his week-day life would have been pleaded by many, as an excuse for staying away, and for taking more absolute rest, on God's Day of Rest. But our dear friend was one of those to whom Religion, in the truest and deepest sense of that word, was, not only the great concern, but also the great comfort, and delight of life. It was no bare or cold sense of mere *duty* that brought him here; it was the deepest feelings and the strongest impulses of his truly Christian heart. So it was that he never, we might almost say, unless actually prevented by illness, or by some unavoidable cause, missed an opportunity of joining with those who could say "*I was glad when they said unto me, We will go into the House of the Lord.*"* And from, I cannot doubt, precisely the same motives, of pure and simple and warm love of God, leading to a rare singleness of purpose in doing any and every good work that God put in his way, he made himself, notwithstanding the unusual pressure upon him of very much secular work with which he was always occupied, the willing official servant of the Church. He was one of those who felt the Church to be really the Church of *God*, not of man; he was not the man to look at these things as worldly men do,—

* Psalm cxxii. 1.

they were deep heart-matters to him. And hence it was from these motives—(had it indeed been otherwise,—had he done such works only from lower motives, we could not have attributed this worth to them)—that he fulfilled these and other duties, in a manner that won for him, and that could not but win for him, the warm affection, regard and respect of us all. So it came to pass that he was known, more or less, to our whole population; and I may add with perfect truth that the more intimately he was known, the more he was loved, as well as respected; and the more clearly did men see that the real, ever working main-spring of his whole life was religion, of the deepest and most Christian kind,—the true love of God, and of man, in God and for God, and the deep feeling of his inmost heart that Christ had saved him, and died for him. In the last letter that I had the happiness to receive from him—only a month ago,—there occur words which I think I may lawfully mention to you, and which expressed the habitual state of his mind towards God. “I have had,” he says, “a sad illness, and why it has occurred I know not. One thing is very certain:—I was very near exchanging Time for Eternity. Well! I trust I am prepared. I have one faith, one hope,—life in Time, life in Eternity, in Christ Jesus.” Such words were not, in his mouth, as they are in some, *mere* words; they expressed, as all who knew him well feel absolutely certain, the deepest and strongest feeling in him.*

And it was because it was so,—because the ruling power and true mainspring of his life was the love of Christ as his Saviour and his heart’s true Lord, that he

* See note at the end.

feel sure that they will become more and more so. Believe me, I can never forget the many proofs of kindness and of love which I have met with at the hands of all here, young and old, rich and poor. I trust that I shall ever remember you in my prayers. I ask you to remember me too, and to ask God that in the new sphere of duty to which I am called I may be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.

May His love, His mercy, His strength and power be with you during life, up to and through that last and greatest change of all.





